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ABSTRACT

The articles in this special issue of the "Illinois English Bulletin" concern the state of composition instruction at the secondary and college levels. The titles and authors are "Monologues or Dialogues? A Plea for Literacy" by Dr. Alfred J. Lindsey, "Teaching Composition: Curiouser and Curiouser" by Denny Brandon, and "Teaching Writing to High School Students: Instilling Confidence" by James T. Klimtzak. (TO)

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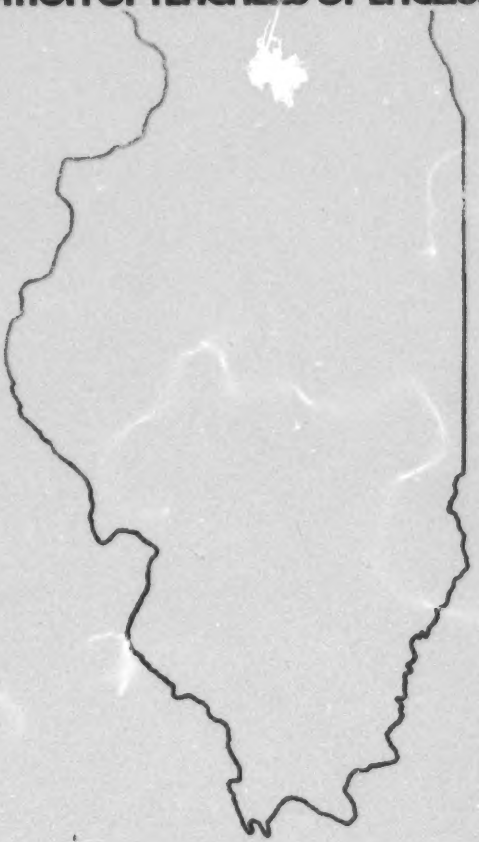

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TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

In a time when many public schools, colleges and universities are faced with slumping enrollments, financial crises, declining programs and many other problems, it is reassuring to know that the research into the teaching of composition continues, that the innovations in the instruction of composition are constantly evolving, and that the careful examination and readjustment of traditional methods have not relaxed. The articles in this special issue of the *Illinois English Bulletin* are evidence of the energetic state of composition instruction, and hopefully these articles will provide not only information but will serve as an inspiration to others to contribute their innovations and special projects to future issues of the *Bulletin*. Perhaps the current school campus crisis being experienced at all levels of education can be partially resolved if English teachers everywhere will strive to improve instruction, making composition not just a required course but instead making it a desired course. A constructive sharing of ideas and methods is certainly a step in the right direction.

Michael Slaughter
Illinois Central College

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Monologues or Dialogues? A Plea for Literacy

DR. ALFRED J. LINDSEY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS
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The utterly necessary professional dialogue between English teachers in universities and language arts teachers in public schools concerning literacy is being heard less often these days, even though the tax-paying public is demanding not only dialogue, but action, a fact substantiated by the brisk rush of the schools to fulfill public demand for performance and behavioral objectives. Curriculum makers in the public schools and elite professors in the universities belch forth now and again with monologues, generally addressed to their immediate colleagues; however, there is scant dialogue between those in the schools and in higher education concerning the effective teaching of literacy, the effect being a reasonably satisfied body of youth who quite possibly have been either tragically misled by high school teachers or grossly misevaluated by university faculties.

This article concerns a study in one aspect of literacy, writing, that was accomplished at a large state university where the author was Director of Freshman Composition. During the summer prior to the start of the 1972-73 school year, the 2,355 freshmen planning to attend the university were asked to write an essay on a topic of high interest. They were told that the essay, along with other measures, would be used for possible advanced placement. After the students wrote for one hour, the essays were collected and taken to three faculty members who evaluated the papers according to the form that follows.

The faculty evaluated the students by using the 35 point scale. Each student earned from 0 to 35 points: 0 to 10 for content; 0 to 10 for organization; 0 to 10 for style; and 0 to 5 for mechanics. Further, the faculty were told to make either a *yes* or *no* reaction for II A, B, C, D, E, and III A, B, and C.

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TEACHER EVALUATION SHEET: 35 POINTS

I. Content: Does the student discuss a significant subject intelligently and completely? (10 points)
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

II. Organization: Is the method of presentation clear and effective? (10 points) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A. Is the central idea (or thesis) clear? Yes No

B. Are there ample details and examples to develop the central idea (or thesis)? Yes No

C. Are the ideas developed in logical order? Yes No

D. Are the transitions adequate? Yes No

E. Are the ideas given the emphasis required by their importance? Yes No

III. Style: Does the essay incorporate effective stylistic procedures? (10 points) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A. Is the diction accurate, well chosen, and sufficiently varied? Yes No

B. Is the sentence structure effective? Yes No

C. Is there appropriate variety in ways of developing paragraphs? Yes No

Other
Concerns: Concerning mechanics, is the essay reasonably free of idiomatic difficulties, fragments, run-on sentences, comma splices, faulty parallel structure, mixed constructions, dangling modifiers, and errors of agreement, case, and verb forms? Is the paper reasonably free of spelling errors and punctuation errors? (5 points) 1 2 3 4 5

TOTAL SCORE:_____

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Before each student wrote the essay, however, he was asked to react to the statements represented in the form that follows. The first three statements were used to classify students in the following ways: location; size school; and typical high school grade in English. Question 4, which was to be answered either strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, or strongly disagree, was asked to determine just how confident students were that they could succeed in freshman composition. Statements 5 through 16, which were to be answered in the same way as statement 4, examined how well each student felt he could do in each of the several areas measured by the teachers' rating sheet: Statement 5 on the student sheet was to compare with I on the teacher evaluation sheet; 6 with II; 7 with IIA; 8 with IIB; 9 with IIC; 10 with IID; 11 with IIE; 12 with III; 13 with IIIA; 14 with IIIB; 15 with IIIC; and 16 with "no opinion".

FRESHMAN ENGLISH SUMMER TESTING STATEMENTS

1. I come from the following area:
   1. suburban area 2. urban (city) area 3. rural area

2. I attended the following size of high school:
   1. large (1500+ students) 2. medium (501-1500)
   3. small (1-500)

3. My typical grade in high school English was:
   1. A 2. B 3. C 4. D 5. F

Questions 4-16 use five answer scale:
1) strongly agree; 2) agree; 3) no opinion; 4) disagree; 5) strongly disagree

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4. I feel that I am well prepared to succeed in freshman composition.

5. I have been well taught how to handle content in an essay by discussing a significant subject intelligently and completely.

6. I have been well taught how to organize an essay clearly and effectively.

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7. I have been well taught how to develop an essay so that the central idea or thesis is clear.

8. I have been well taught how to use ample details and examples to develop the central idea.

9. I have been well taught how to develop ideas in logical order.

10. I have been well taught how to use transitions.

11. I have been well taught how to develop my ideas with the emphasis required by their importance.

12. I have been well taught how to incorporate effective stylistic procedures in my writing.

13. I have been well taught how to use diction that is accurate, well chosen, and sufficiently varied.

14. I have been well taught how effectively to develop sentences.

15. I have been well taught how to develop paragraphs in a variety of ways.

16. I have been well taught how to write an essay that is reasonably free of mechanical errors.

Questions one through three resulted in the following groupings:

Classification	*Number of Students*	*Percentage of Students*
I. Area		
A. Suburban	1142	48.7
B. Urban	637	27.1
C. Rural	568	24.2
II. Size School		
A. 1501+	1242	53.1
B. 501-1500	633	27.0
C. 1-500	466	19.9

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Classification	Number of Students	Percentage of Students
III. Typical High School English Grade		
A. A	445	19.1
B. B	1401	60.0
C. C	472	20.2
D. D	16	.7
E. F	0	0
Mean Grade Point Average 2.92 on 4 point scale		

When asked if they were well prepared to succeed in freshman composition, the students answered in the following way:

Strongly Agree	14.3%
Agree	58.1%
No Opinion	16.1%
Disagree	10.6%
Strongly Disagree	.8%

As a whole, then, the students felt rather courageous about the impending work in freshman composition, as evidenced by the substantial 72.4 percent agree or strongly agree answers. This result is not surprising given the fact that the students were, for the most part, quite successful in high school, where 79.1 percent earned either A's or B's, and where they earned a mean grade point average of 2.92, very nearly a B rating.

This is not to assert, though, that all of the freshmen felt confidence; for 27.5 percent were not able to express favorable prediction of their success, as they either had no opinion, disagreed, or strongly disagreed. Indeed, a lack of confidence by over one-fourth of the students indicates a serious problem, and the need for immediate programs of remediation for such people.

The confidence of the majority of the freshmen, however, is in evidence on the following chart, along with the mean ratings by the faculty involved in the evaluation. On the left of the chart are the statements to which the students were asked to react along with the percentage of strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, and strongly disagree answers. Directly below

STUDENT PERCENTAGES						TEACHER RATING	
STUDENT STATEMENTS	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Classification	Mean Rating
I have been well taught how to handle content in an essay by discussing a significant subject intelligently and completely.	7.4	51.5	18.7	20.9	.8		
			Teacher Question:				
			Content: Does the student discuss a significant subject intelligently and completely? (10 points)			Suburban School	4.07
						Urban School	4.01
						Rural School	4.08
						1501+ Students	4.04
						501-1500 Students	4.06
						1-500 Students	4.09
						A grade	4.45
						B grade	4.08
						C grade	3.66
						D grade	2.93

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STUDENT PERCENTAGES						TEACHER RATING	
STUDENT STATEMENTS	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Classification	Mean Rating
I have been well taught how to organize an essay.	10.9	55.8	13.8	18.1	1.3		
			Teacher Question:				
			Organization: Is the method of presentation clear and effective? (10 points)			Suburban School	3.80
						Urban School	3.80
						Rural School	3.86
						1501+ Students	3.84
						501-1500 Students	3.81
						1-500 Students	3.96
						A grade	4.23
						B grade	3.87
						C grade	3.40
						D grade	2.53

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STUDENT PERCENTAGES						TEACHER RATING	
STUDENT STATEMENTS	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Classification	Mean Rating
I have been well taught how to incorporate effective stylistic procedures in my writing.	3.7	25.0	31.1	36.0	4.2		
			Teacher Question:				
			Style: Does the essay incorporate effective stylistic procedures? (10 points)			Suburban School	3.99
						Urban School	4.01
						Rural School	3.93
						1501+ Students	3.96
						501-1500 Students	3.94
						1-500 Students	3.97
						A grade	4.31
						B grade	3.99
						C grade	3.57
						D grade	2.87

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STUDENT PERCENTAGES						TEACHER RATING	
STUDENT STATEMENTS	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Classification	Mean Rating
I have been well taught how to write an essay that is reasonably free of mechanical errors.	11.2	45.5	16.0	21.8	5.6		
	Teacher Question						
	Mechanics: Is the essay reasonably free of idiomatic difficulties, fragments, run on sentences, comma splices, faulty parallel structure, mixed constructions, dangling modifiers, and errors of agreement, case, and verb forms? Is the paper reasonably free of spelling and punctuation errors?					Suburban School Urban School Rural School	3.23 3.49 3.16
						1501+ Students 901-1500 Students 1-900 Students	3.19 3.25 3.16
						A grade B grade C grade D grade	3.39 3.24 2.95 2.75

	STUDENT PERCENTAGES					TEACHER RATING	
STUDENT STATEMENTS	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Classification	Mean Rating
Total rating on organization, content, style, and mechanics.	10.0	49.9	19.8	18.6	1.8		
			Total Mean Ratings for content, organization, style, and mechanics.			Suburban School	15.15
						Urban School	14.91
						Rural School	15.03
						1501+ Students	15.03
						501-1500 Students	15.06
						1-500 Students	15.12
						A grade	16.38
						B grade	15.18
						C grade	13.64
						D grade	11.06

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these student percentages are the corresponding faculty statements, and on the right side of the chart are the mean teacher reactions to the statements for location, size, and typical grade.

For the most part, the chart indicates positive student thinking concerning the several skills measured, a fact supported by an examination of the total scores. Note that 59.9 percent of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that they had been well taught how to handle organization, content, style, and mechanics, though there were important differences among the skills. Fifty-eight and nine-tenths percent of the writers either agreed or strongly agreed that they were well trained to handle content; 56.7 percent felt as confident about organization. Alternately, however, just 28.7 percent reacted positively toward their training in style, but the positive view was reaffirmed by a 66.7 percent total in mechanics. With the exception of style, then, it is clear that a substantial majority of the students were positive indeed about their training in composition.

But there is more that is disappointing than the problem of style, for many of the students were negative about their writing skills. Overall, 19.8 percent would not react, claiming no opinion. Concerning content, 21.7 percent either disagreed or strongly disagreed, a figure very little less than the 27.4 percent in mechanics. And note that in style 40.2 percent reacted either disagree or strongly disagree, this coupled with the 31.1 percent having no opinion indicating a substantial negative view of their training in style.

Overall, however, there was a surprising positive view of preparation to write, a student conceptualization that would seem to indicate that a majority of the assigned papers composed by the students would have been well written. Unfortunately, this assumption was not supported by the results of the faculty evaluation of the papers, an important and puissant fact.

The foregoing chart indicates the significant disagreement of the faculty grading the papers and the primarily optimistic view of the students. In the right hand column of the chart are mean scores overall and for each of content, organization, style, and mechanics. Each student could earn from 0 to 35 points overall: 0 to 10 for content; 0 to 10 for organization; 0 to 10 for style; and 0 to 5 for mechanics. The mean scores were computed for each of the groups considered: location, size, and grades earned in each of the areas mentioned above, and for the total scores. The total scores indicate the considerable disa-

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greement between student and teacher conceptualizations. Note that the highest mean score out of a possible 35 points was earned by A students in high school, but their score was only a mean of 16.38, or less than 40 percent of what they might have earned, a finding that does not juxtapose with the basically optimistic view of the students. The overall mean scores among the various groups ran from 16.38 to 11.06, figures representing the high and low mean scores according to grades earned. The mean overall scores for different size schools ranged from 3.86 to 3.80 in content, a mean difference of only .06, a situation very much like the one in organization where the range was from 3.81 to 3.90, a mean difference of just .09. Indeed, an examination of the results in content, organization, style, and mechanics indicates, surprising to say, that there was no significant difference in location and size of school, the highest scores being remarkably low given the optimism of the students. Typical high school grades offer some differentiation, but even here the very best mean score of 16.38 is tragically disappointing. Ultimately, then, the faculty who evaluated the essays indicated an inferior performance by the students, those who for the most part had felt very confident about their writing.

But there is yet another measure of comparison: On the evaluation sheet used by the faculty, there were statements to be answered *yes* or *no* in the areas of organization and style. In order to allow some comparison between faculty and students, the student answers corresponding to the faculty questions were grouped in the following way: agree and strongly agree were put together for the positive comment, and disagree and strongly disagree were joined for the negative comment, an endeavor represented in the following chart.

The first five questions on the chart measured aspects of organization. While 75.5 percent of the students felt they had been well taught how to develop an essay so that the central idea or thesis was clear, 65.2 percent of the faculty agreed; but more damaging findings are to be noted on the negative side of the chart, where only 11.8 percent of the students reacted negatively, while 34.8 percent of the faculty did so. Sixty-nine percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they had been well taught to use ample details and examples to develop the central idea, but just 35.7 percent of the teachers answered yes, a difference of one-third. And note that just 14.7 percent of the students reacted negatively, while 64.3 percent of the

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PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO AGREE
OR DISAGREE & FACULTY WHO
ANSWERED YES OR NO

Question	Student Agree or Strongly Agree	Faculty Yes	Student Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Faculty No
Is the central idea or thesis clear?	75.5	65.2	11.8	34.8
Are their ample details and examples to develop the central idea (or thesis)?	69.0	35.7	14.7	64.3
Are ideas developed in logical order?	69.7	35.9	14.4	64.1
Are the transitions adequate?	39.0	28.3	18.7	71.7
Are the ideas given the emphasis required by their importance?	59.8	27.9	18.8	72.1
Is the diction accurate, well chosen, and sufficiently varied?	54.3	62.9	20.7	37.1
Is the sentence structure effective?	79.4	36.9	10.6	63.1
Is there appropriate variety in ways of developing paragraphs?	56.7	6.8	27.4	93.2

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teachers did so, a huge dissimilarity of 49.6 percent. Sixty-nine and seven-tenths of the students felt that they had been well taught to develop ideas in logical order; only 35.7 percent of the faculty answered yes. At the negative end of the continuum, 14.4 percent of the students expressed a negative reaction, a 50 percent smaller figure than the 64.1 percent of the faculty. Just 39 percent of the students reacted favorably to the use of transitions, but the faculty rating was even lower, 28.3 percent. A huge difference of 53 percent was recorded between faculty and students on the negative side of the chart. Concerning emphasis, 59.8 percent of the students were confident, but only 27.9 percent of the faculty were in agreement. On the disagree side of the chart, the student vote was 18.8 percent, while the faculty reaction of *no* was 72.1 percent, a difference of 53.3 percent.

The last three statements on the chart were in relation to style; diction, syntax, and paragraphing were measured. Surprising to say, in the positive reaction, the faculty felt better about student diction than students did, the mean score for the students being 54.3 percent, the faculty 62.9 percent. Negatively, however, the mean faculty score was 37.1 as compared with the student 20.7 percent. A much less optimistic situation was apparent in sentence development: 79.4 percent of the students answered agree or strongly agree; 36.9 percent of the faculty did so, a mean difference of 42.5 percent. Alternately, just 10.6 percent of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed, but 63.1 percent of the faculty voted *no*, a mean difference of 42.5 percent. And given the time that many high schools claim to take in teaching paragraphing, the findings concerning the student use of appropriate variety in ways of developing paragraphs are most perplexing: 56.7 percent of the students reacted affirmatively; just 6.8 percent of the faculty did so, a mean difference of 49.9 percent. Twenty-seven and four-tenths of the students answered negatively, while 93.2 percent of the faculty did so, a gigantic difference of 65.8 percent.

Indeed, the comparison of student conceptualizations of their writing ability with the faculty continuum of scores measuring content, organization, style, and mechanics as well as the yes and no reactions representing organization and style indicates a huge gulf between what most of the students thought they could do and what the faculty members evaluated them as having done.

Further, some popular assumptions are called to question.

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Much of the literature in the field asserts that those who come from small schools and rural areas are neglected in their educational experience, and that suburban students from more wealthy areas are profiting from the financial and intellectual reserves of the suburbs. This was not the situation in this study; people from the small schools produced very much like the students from the suburbs. A similar situation obtained with students from the urban centers, a group comparing very favorably with the other two. But this is not to make any optimistic or positive claims, for the performance of these students was quite poor according to the faculty who graded their papers. Indeed, even the A and B high school students did very badly.

Hence, a study in one aspect of the teaching literacy, writing, has produced disappointing results, as students seem to have been tragically misled or unprofessionally evaluated, deplorable accusations against education and cruel, unprofessional tricks to perpetrate on the youth. Such business calls to question education, and brings credence to those demanding accountability in the schools. If, indeed, the other areas of literacy produce a similar situation to the problems in writing analyzed in this article, a national problem of mortal proportions exists.

But who is at fault? This writer will make no absolute accusations, for who knows where the burden of educational blame resides? This, however, is clear: the high school teachers, to a lesser or greater degree, teach composition. A substantial majority of the 2,355 students entering the large state university felt optimistic about their training in writing. The university faculty who evaluated the essays produced scores representing deplorable writing skills of the incoming freshmen. But are those results, in fact, correct? Do college teachers know as much as public school teachers about composition? And if the college teachers are correct, are they maintaining an adequate dialogue with the public schools? Whether in college or high school, the educators involved in the deception must, absolutely must, come together to find out who is right and who is failing whom. The tax paying public is not willing that their children be failed by the profession any longer, nor should they be. The often haughty monologues of university professors must stop; the basic distrust of the institutions of higher education by overworked and weary public school teachers must stop. It is past time for meaningful dialogue in an odds-on-effort to discover why the students are being so horribly misled or incorrectly

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evaluated. The team effort must lead to a sequential program for each child in composition and other skills necessary to exist in America and in college if he or she plans to attend. And if the professional juxtaposition of the university and the public school English teachers is not accomplished, the failed children and their parents may call on General Motors, IBM, or other huge corporations, that, God help us, will teach them the skills needed to succeed. Indeed, if professionals in teaching do not solve such problems as the one examined in this article, professionals in business may do so, a fact that educators must seriously, studiously, and professionally consider. Parents will insist on literate progeny, one way or the other. Hence, the educational monologue must cease as public school and university teachers begin dialogue leading to professional action in teaching literacy to every child.

TEACHING COMPOSITION: CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER

DENNY BRANDON
TUSCOLA HIGH SCHOOL

The English teacher's is a Kafkaesque world with *Alice in Wonderland* encounters and Dickens characters. Indeed this bizarre article about teaching composition is written by one who writes and teaches writing with greater pain than results. It is a blind man telling blind men that perhaps their guides can't see. Hopefully this candid admission that at least some of us are groping in the dark can begin to define our profession's most persistent problem.

All too soon the hopeful composition teacher, who over the summer, outlined the latest snappy sure-fire techniques for teaching writing despairs. He realizes after only a few themes into the first grading period not only that his students did not know how to write when they came to him, but also that they are not responding any better now than others did under the last five approaches to teaching the essay. But with the litany of the university rhetoric committee, "High school English teachers don't teach writing," echoing painfully in the background, the harried high school instructor responds most often in one of four ways.

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One response in every English department is Mr. Grindstone's. This handwringing researcher is in the school library before school, over lunch, during his preparation period, and after his last class. He collects models. He pours over the most authoritative volumes of grammar, mechanics, and usage. He underlines and stars the margins of his professional journals. At night he bends over a littered kitchen table pausing only to refill his coffee mug and look dispirited as his oldest son whispers hoarsely to the others, "Be quiet! Daddy's grading papers."

Old Mrs. Girth's reaction to the annual college complaint is, "I've said it every year for twenty-three years and I still say they are not talking about us. I've got a folder of superior themes collected over the years to prove it. Remember Elizabeth Ann? She got an A in her very first college English class; now what do you say to that? Traditional grammar and *Silas Marner* still get the job done."

The department cynic, Mrs. Bitters, disdainfully tosses the *School Board Journal* back to the building principal and says, "Some kids can't write. You know it, and I know it. They eventually make more money than either of us because their secretary corrects everything they scribble. Who can blame them? Even great novelists have their editors correct their manuscripts."

Lance, every school's radical in residence, chimes in, "Man, that stuff's yesterday's bag! My guys get their own head together through yoga and sensitivity training. Then they show real insight and originality in collages and mobiles--sometimes even in writing. They can't do their thing and be confined by the old unity-coherence-clarity hang ups. They gotta flow with nature!"

So the colleges keep bewailing the freshman's lack of fluency. The principal continues to put underlined articles in the English department chairman's mailbox. The chairman dutifully passes each article to his colleagues and returns it to the principal, who stares at him with the same mixture of pity and contempt he reserves for the football coach in his fourth season without a victory.

Why can't the English department answer the charges against it? Because, like Kafka's K. in *The Trial*, the composition teacher who blue pencils one hundred and fifteen themes at a time finds himself under indictment and without knowledge of the exact nature of his shortcomings and thus with no clear defense or plan for reform. He usually doesn't have time, even

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if he had the inclination, to answer his accusers. In all probability there is nothing new to write about writing, so instead of a defense what follows are random observations as though from a frustrated sophomore's last theme of the year.

I suggest first that we professionals don't know what we want from our students. I have heard my own college professors say that each misspelled word lowers the paper's grade by one letter and in the same lecture propose that the chief end of writing is communication. "If it gets the message across, it's good writing!" Isn't this curious? Isn't it wonderful? Isn't it marvelous? This delightful contradiction would allow the writer any spelling provided it is standard, and any style so long as it is traditional. In this prison without walls he can go anywhere he wants if he stays in one place.

Furthermore, I suggest not only that we don't know what we want but also that we don't know how to get it. There are probably more books and articles published on how to write or how to teach writing than on any other scholarly subject (witness entire issues of *English Journal* and *Illinois English Bulletin* devoted to composition). The variety of approaches ranges from structure to stream of consciousness, covering all possible syntheses between. Is this a smoke screen to cover nothing? Donald M. Murray attempts to clear our view. He is only the latest to say that writing is a process, not a product and that it must be taught as such.[1] The teacher's plea, "How do we teach composition?" should be "How do we teach composing?" This appears illuminating but merely sophisticates the problem.

But we keep trying! We continue to search for truth. We manfully follow the latest messiah of self expression. Still no new method seems to work better than any other. By now we understand Lewis Carroll's Black Queen in *Through The Looking Glass*. "It takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

We can't even decide whether we want our students to be inventive or structured. Oh, we both know those are not mutually exclusive qualities, don't we? But can we show our students how to blend the two elements into a smooth compound? Is there honestly a way to teach unified structure and novelty at the

[1] Donald M. Murray, "Teaching Writing as a Process," *The Leaflet*, cited in *Illinois English Bulletin*, 61, No. 1, October, 1973, p. 15.

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same time? I would like to think so. But when we lay aside the welter of words, don't we have to say that up to this day there is discernible relationship between teaching writing and learning anything else? Every experienced teacher has cherished memories of well written papers from poor writers to reinforce this doubt.

Perhaps this leads to the clearest distillation of the problem. Most teachers can't teach writing because they weren't taught writing themselves. The university that seeks to know why its graduates repay their alma mater with but another generation of non-writers should look to its curriculum. How many grammar and rhetoric courses are available to its students? How does this compare with the number of course offerings in drama, a facet of English seldom taught more than three weeks a year? I am familiar with the mimetic theory that reading good literature makes good writing. I am familiar with it, but I reject it. Every high school English instructor teaches ample pages of literature to insure great fluency, and still the woeful outcome for many students is the same. They remain non-writers.

At the risk of a verdict of heresy, I question whether we can do much better than agree with the platonists who contentedly call something well done a visitation of the gods. Let's give the students Milton for a model and make an invocation of the muse an essential to a good introductory paragraph. We've tried everything else.

I compared this article to a frustrated sophomore's last theme. A frustrated sophomore's theme seldom has a clearly stated conclusion. I will be faithful to my model and close by relating an anecdote I heard as a child. An applicant for a teaching job in a rural school was asked what she considered the most important quality in a teacher. "You gotta know what you're gonna teach," she said. "Trying to teach what you don't know is like trying to come back from where you ain't never been."

That, I submit, communicates.

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TEACHING WRITING TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: INSTILLING CONFIDENCE

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Much has been written about methods for the teaching of writing to high school students. Workbooks, sequential texts and essays concerning methods and their application offer ideas that are adaptable to the individual situation. Each method has the common objective to establish a measurable improvement in the quality of the student's writing production over a period of time. The numerous methods and varied applications, which often hinge on several other methods and applications, create questions in my mind as to what aspects of a method are useful to my situation, and when should I use the preferred aspects of a method, if to use them at all, in conjunction with other approaches. Every new year brings with it a new set of students with calls for a modification of last year's method and application to the point where you are again "playing-it-by-ear."

What fascinates me is the confidence an author puts into his suggested method. Many times the author of a method literally cries out with a salesman's pitch, "This will work!", or, "Try it, you'll like it!" What fascinates me even more is the confidence some researchers put in the student's capabilities and potentialities in their proposed methods, with the hopeful results that a student *can* himself write confidently and effectively. Teachers should be aware of this implicit fact in connection with the method, or combination of methods, they propose to use. We must be confident that all students will improve in their writing skills. Confidence must be primarily put in the student's individual potential and the possiblity of broadening a student's inherent talents, or no method, whatever it may be, will be effective.

Students presume a confidence in their teacher because the teacher is older, or he may have an impressive degree or possibly several impressive degrees, or he may have an excellent reputation as a teacher, or he may have written published articles, or, and this does exist even though it seems supernatural, he

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is a combination of all the above. This same confidence must be reciprocated. Students are young, and they have unique experiences and fresh, novel ideas. Students will work intensively at an appealing and challenging task. They are creative in their many and varied ways of expression. Why should we perpetuate a problem that has stifled good writing from many students for too long a time? Why should we wait until our students get older, until some are given college degrees, until some turn out to be teachers or professional writers, before we put our confidence in them as creative writers? As teachers, we must now have a belief in the capabilities and potentialities of each student to produce quality writing as a student.

James Moffett in *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973) suggests a method which is explicitly dependent upon a teacher's confidence in the student. The basis of his method is discussion--talk among a group of five or six students. Moffett believes that verbalization of a student's experiences is the first step to a written product. Discussion helps the student recognize his own experiences and compare them with other students. Discussion also orientates the student toward the audience for which he will be writing. The audience is not a teacher who sits in judgement of a written piece, but a group of peers who share, disagree with, and suggest improvement, regarding a writer's experiences, ideas, and wording structure.

The big problem is making the transition from speaking to writing. Moffett suggests more discussion. The student writes what he has verbalized, whether it is his own ideas or a comment or modification of another student's ideas. At this point, students exchange papers in the group for verbal and written evaluation. The evaluation is not based on a "this-is-wrong-and-this-is-correct" approach, or a "pass/fail" approach. It is based on "you-*can*-and-*will*-improve." Grammatical and content evaluation are not totally constricted to standard usage laws which may tend to stifle a student's initiative and creativity. Rather, evaluation is partially based on restructuring the way ideas are expressed without changing the ideas. Students might suggest a "better way of putting it."

The teacher's evaluation of the paper runs parallel to the students' evaluations. The result of several evaluations to one written piece is a more objective evaluation and a possibility of

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multiple options from which the student may choose. A teacher's confidence in a student's ability to evaluate and suggest alternate ways of expression can only be an asset to another student, as well as to the teacher. It allows for more time to write more pieces, and more evaluation. This approach promotes quantity that will eventually produce quality.

The Moffett method finally hopes to help the student develop a confidence. The student is asked to be confident of his own ability to write and evaluate and to accept confidently the immediate feedback of others. Feedback, which is evaluation and suggestion, is not punitive, but is rather an opportunity to improve. It does not damage initiative and creativity! Rather, it instills confidence in the writer that he can and will write more effectively.

Kenneth Koch in *Wishes, Lies and Dreams* (New York: Vintage Books, Chelsea House Publishers, 1971) begins with the same premise as James Moffett. Koch suggests that before you engage in a method of teaching the writing of poetry, you must make the students believe you believe they are poets. He then proceeds to put a confidence in their ability to create a free flow of ideas which are not stifled by an adherence to classical styles, laws of poetry (e.g. rhyme, meter) or laws of grammar. The poems are then read aloud for suggestions and evaluations from the students as well as the teacher.

Both Moffett and Koch rely on the past experiences of the students, the ability of the students to recall those experiences, to verbalize those experiences (group discussion), and finally to write in a coherent, comprehensible fashion which also depends on constant group feedback. Their methods offer nothing without a teacher's initial confidence in the future improvement of a student as a writer. No method for teaching writing to high school students will work if it does not primarily contain a teacher's confidence in the student as a prerequisite. For too long now confidence has been put into what the teacher thinks or knows, or believes to be the only way of writing. Consequently, we find students writing for the teacher and being forced into a style of writing which is not uniquely their own. In such a case, the method will work, as all methods do, but the results will be minimal, as we are all well aware. The positive results will be gauged on the student's ability to imitate the method and what the method suggests. Creativity will obviously be minimal.

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Our task as teachers is to adopt a method such as Moffett's or Koch's, or develop a method which includes a prerequisite where the teacher must initially exhibit and persist in demonstrating a confidence in the abilities and future improvement of a student as a writer. For once, we, as teachers, must believe in the person, not the mechanics; that is, in the student, not the method. When we refer to the coined statements, "You can't write," or, "If you keep doing this, you'll never improve," we are putting the method before the student. This only damages the student's ego, his desire to improve, and most of all, it shows him that you don't have confidence in him as a writer.

As Moffett and Koch suggest, the method should be "student-centered." The student should be the nucleus of any method, since it is the student who eventually verbalizes, writes and revises his own ideas. This approach can only promote individual creativity, and no longer make a student a "slave" to a method. Our work, as teachers, becomes one of being an advisor, and not a judge. Our comments will be taken seriously by the student because our verbal and written evaluation will be based on our suggestions to the student for improvement, and not our assessment of a pass/fail paper. As you can see, the teacher's role in a "student-centered" method is not made secondary. It is a more active role which allows for individual attention to students who have a need for more improvement than others.

The age-old problems of teaching writing to students can at least be partially alleviated if the teacher chooses a "student-centered" method. The prerequisite of a teacher's confidence in the student as a writer must be a teacher's guide in the application of a chosen method and a never forgotten premise in the implementation of that method.

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